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ABSTRACT

This document summarizes the first report of a study of factors involved in sustainable school improvement in New Zealand. The study's purpose is to see whether there is a common understanding of "school improvement" in schools, and in the external agencies and organizations that support or frame their work. The report describes ten case studies in nine primary schools and one intermediate school that have made deliberate efforts in the last 3 to 5 years to bring about positive improvements in teaching and learning. It provides descriptive material about the case studies and the main features that supported or constrained them in their efforts to develop. Information was collected from interviews with 32 people, including principals, government officials, researchers, and teacher educators. It highlights similarities and differences in perspective about their understanding of school improvement, and main themes and issues related to improvement. Study results point to the need for schools to create conditions to support reflective practice, and the need for a strong role to be played by government in offering the kinds of resources, support, and professional development that enable schools to be effective and continually improving learning organizations. (Contains 18 references.) (RT)

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Sustaining school improvement:
Ten primary schools' journeys

A summary

Linda Mitchell, Marie Cameron, and Cathy Wylie

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SUSTAINING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT – TEN PRIMARY SCHOOLS' JOURNEYS

A Summary

Linda Mitchell, Marie Cameron,
and Cathy Wylie

New Zealand Council for Educational Research
Te Rūnanga o Aotearoa mō te Rangahau i te Mātauranga
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2002

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1 MAIN FINDINGS

Introduction

This is a summary of the first report of a study which seeks to expand our understanding of factors involved in sustainable school improvement in New Zealand and to see whether there is now a common understanding of "school improvement" in schools and the external agencies and organisations which support or frame their work. The full report describes case studies in nine primary schools and one intermediate school which have made deliberate efforts in the last three to five years to bring about positive improvements in teaching and learning. The schools will be studied again in 2004, giving the opportunity to find out what is involved in improvement over time and its sustainability. The full report provides descriptive material about the case study schools and the main features that supported or constrained them in their efforts to develop. Secondly, the full report describes interviews with 32 experienced people involved in schools as practising primary principals, representatives of schools sector organisations, government officials, academics and researchers, and teacher educators. It highlights similarities and differences in perspective about their understanding of school improvement, and main themes and issues related to improvement.

Case Studies

The ten schools had different histories and different patterns of development that distinguished them. But there were common features about starting points and development paths that were used as a basis for grouping them. The starting points were:

- Culture of steady development—no clear starting point. These were stable schools, making positive changes in teaching and learning over time.
- Rapid roll growth schools. Two schools had rapid roll growth; one from 300 to 375 in 3 years, the other from 193 to 255 students.
- Crisis turn-around schools, where the school had moved from a point of crisis to positive development.

All schools had some features in common and took some similar and some different approaches.

In the *steady development* schools, a new platform was to raise teacher expectations of student achievement, and work to improve student achievement and behaviour. In two of the low decile schools, special efforts were made to engage parents, draw on parents' knowledge, and develop greater coherence between school and home, and/or early childhood centre and school. All schools developed links with community groups in order to strengthen resources for students and families.

The philosophies, climate, and programme of the *roll-growth* schools seemed to match the expectations and needs of the communities. Adjusting to roll growth brought

challenges of recruiting new teachers and coping with staff changes. One school used organisational structure to create a family atmosphere, by organising the school as a campus with separate primary and intermediate schools and offering consistency through school-wide approaches to planning, assessment, and curriculum. The other had a strongly collaborative approach and shared leadership.

The crisis turn-around schools all had to deal with low morale, bring staff into a cohesive team, and improve poor public image and the social and physical environment. Principals made a thoughtful analysis of the problems and systematically addressed them. Each principal developed a constructive relationship with the board of trustees chair and trustees undertook training. The relationship with the board of trustees chair and development of clear management and governance roles provided support to the principal during this time, and were a useful link with parents. Each school created a positive climate, e.g., through improvements in buildings and playgrounds, achieving success in outside competitions, and gaining positive publicity.

Five common elements emerged in all schools:

- Staff shared and understood school goals, which had a primary focus on student learning.
- Teachers had high expectations about student achievement and behaviour. Some teachers' perceptions of children's capabilities and expectations of children were extended through professional development.
- Student feedback was used to help students gain insight into their own work, and to become reflective about their own work.
- There was a major focus on literacy and numeracy in all schools, with some schools integrating the curriculum and others cutting back in some areas. The flexibility to use achievement objectives selectively allowed schools to construct their own goals in response to analysis of students' need. Only one school described its efforts to systematically cover and have professional development in all essential learning areas, in response to Education Review Office (ERO) criticism. Some thought the mandated curriculum made unrealistic demands on teachers. Some schools offered extension programmes.
- There were varying approaches to assessment, with some schools struggling to use assessment tools and interpret data for student learning. Schools that were part of the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Literacy Enhancement Programme were positive about their learning from this programme of how to develop and moderate their own benchmarks, provide consistent shared standards across the whole school, and have a common base from which to analyse teaching and learning.

Information about student achievement levels over time was easiest for schools to provide where they developed school-wide exemplars or standards of expected achievement for different curriculum levels or units, or used standardised tests. Most schools tracked the achievement of students at different levels, and identified students who needed additional attention. Some schools focused their programme on identified need and checked to gauge whether progress had been made to meet expectations.

Some schools gave evidence of rises in student achievement levels over three or four years, but this was not constantly upwards, reflecting the natural variability of students, teacher expertise, and to some degree the priority given to a curriculum area, including professional development.

Professional development was regarded as a crucial condition of work, with whole school approaches generally being seen as of greater benefit to school-wide teaching and learning than individually targeted professional development. Schools found it useful to identify professional development needs from analysing data on student learning. Most professional development was related to improving achievement in curriculum areas. Many schools focused on literacy and numeracy.

Six features common to professional development processes were identified by schools as being valuable:

- High expectations about student achievement were generated.
- Goals and benchmarks were developed across the whole school based on information about student achievement.
- Professional development was related to identified needs of students and teaching skills and knowledge.
- Professional development was offered for teachers, both as a staff group and as individuals. This took a variety of forms, including whole school workshops, teachers observing others teach, teachers working in pairs, teachers being observed and receiving feedback on their own teaching.
- Staff members who were skilled in the area of focus led professional development, as well as external facilitators.
- There was a belief that all teachers contributed to student achievement and all could develop professionally.

Conditions within the school supported professional development. This included time available during the school day to discuss teaching and learning and access to outside advisers and professional developers who had a high level of theoretical knowledge and ability to talk about and model pedagogical strategies.

Staff worked with parents in reporting about their child and suggesting home activities, supporting parents in low decile, ethnically diverse schools through establishing parent support groups, and involving parents in work and decision-making within the school.

There were different styles of principalship (top-down or collaborative), and these changed at different points in the development path; but most participants thought the principal's role was crucial to school development. Most of the 10 principals had strong determination, a love of their school, and were good communicators. They had sound educational knowledge and were lifelong learners. Leadership was not confined to principalship.

The government plays an important role in creating conditions to support schools, through its infrastructure for planning, funding, staffing, advisory support, monitoring, training, research and development. In the case studies, some schools seemed to be especially vulnerable:

- schools at the cutting edge of educational change;
- schools which are turning around from crisis;
- those with smaller rolls, where a large work burden rested on individual staff members and there was a sense of having to start over again if there were key staff resignation;
- low decile schools (1 and 2), where resources were meagre and fund-raising was being carried out for basic curriculum activities;
- schools with a high number of children for whom English was a second language, where extra efforts were needed to communicate with families.
- schools catering for transient students, who were shown often to be achieving less well than other students.

Broader economic and social policies were significant, especially for low decile schools. Some staff thought government education and housing policies since 1999 had brought a less competitive environment between schools, a less transient population since the introduction of income-related rents, and more parents in paid employment. These changes benefited student well-being and led to greater stability.

Views of Experienced School Sector Personnel

What is School Improvement?

Student learning lay at the heart of views of school improvement held by experienced school sector personnel. But there were three different underlying approaches:

- the concept of school improvement as *school development*, generated by those in the school, in their own terms, to meet local needs, with an emphasis on processes and school culture;
- an emphasis on school improvement as *lifting school performance* where needed, and with government support, to meet national standards of performance in terms of legislation and goals related to raising student achievement and closing gaps, but seeing the role of school culture, values, and ownership of needs analysis and goals as fundamental to any change;
- an emphasis on school improvement as focusing on *meeting national or international academic standards*, within a competitive environment.

Principals, teacher educators, academics, and researchers tended to hold the first approach, which was closest to the experiences of the ten schools.

The Role of Government

The different viewpoints were associated with different ideas on how schools should be supported, and the role that government agencies should play. Those who held broader views of the purpose of schools thought the role of government was to create conditions that enable all schools to flourish. In contrast, the view of school improvement as focusing on meeting national or international academic standards was associated with

prescriptive measures of achievement, and application of a range of incentives to encourage schools to meet the measures.

Over a third of participants identified tensions between the role of ERO and school improvement. Most thought responsibility for a productive relationship rested with both the school and ERO, and that ERO needed to be responsive to the school's own goals. Accountability to ERO needed to be congruent with accountability to teaching and learning, with documentation serving both purposes. Some made suggestions on how ERO could better support schools:

- by reviewing against the school's own plans, including the adequacy of those plans;
- by having reviewers who were effective practitioners themselves, and knowledgeable about schools.

Most participants supported the new "assess and support" model, which had just been proposed in the review of ERO (Review Committee ERO, 2000) when we did our interviews; but one questioned ERO's capacity to assist schools, when he thought ERO's expertise lay in assessing schools; another thought that advice and audit should be separated; and a third warned that there should not be a shift in standards.

Most of the principals, schools sector representatives, and advisers gave examples of dissonance between requirements placed on schools and school development, some ways in which government agencies could improve their approach to schools, such as through better consultation and communication, and the importance of a sound foundation of good school staffing and funding for all schools. An implication is the need for government agencies to tailor their approaches to school needs, in order to create support systems that are integrated with the school's own efforts.

School Context

The participants identified important practices and conditions within schools to help them to improve. Most thought that an essential practice was the collection, analysis, and use of data to evaluate and plan in relation to student learning and school goals, and to communicate and be accountable to others. This view related to a concept of teaching as both an analytic and creative process.

Three participants commented that teachers often did not have adequate skills in data collection and analysis. In general, there was agreement that there needs to be a clear purpose for assessment, which should be of high quality, parsimonious, and put to good use.

Conditions were suggested to enable schools to make effective use of assessment data:

- undertaking an ongoing cycle of objective setting, planning, and evaluation;
- discussing assessment data and teaching and learning with the wider teaching team within the school;
- having a school-wide approach;
- accessing specialists;

- engaging students in what they think and experience;
- accessing examples from other schools;
- communicating with parents about assessments.

School vision and goals that are developed and "owned" by the school were seen as necessary for schools to sustain school improvement. The school culture needed to be in line with the vision. Most participants described how to translate vision and goals into practice, and how to evaluate or review progress in relation to them. This was described as a reflective and analytic process that had a purpose, used data collection and analysis, resulted in changed insights, involved all groups within the school, and was evaluated independently.

Professional development was regarded as an essential condition for sustainable school improvement, because the capacity of staff to learn and respond to information about students' learning needs to be built and supported. Clustering and mentoring schemes were regarded as valuable in providing collegial support and pooling expertise. Most participants supported the notion that in a school which is improving, teachers and principal need to be reflective practitioners, engaged in thinking and talking about educational ideas, teaching, and learning. Associated with this came a call for a literate workforce of teachers, who read widely and keep up to date with educational research and thinking. Underneath the ideas was an understanding that teaching is not mechanistic, but involves intellectual engagement, risk taking, and passion. Conditions to support teachers were identified as a leadership that values and models critical thinking, discussion, and investigation, time within the school day and at staff meetings for meaningful examination of educational issues, and access to a range of up-to-date, relevant research written for the classroom teacher. Access to high-quality advice and support was seen as a critical condition, and there was some criticism of New Zealand's patchy provision and variable standards of advisory services. One participant thought that primary teachers, because they are generalists, need specialist advice and support. Most thought that professional development needs to relate to the goals of the school.

Effective leadership was highlighted as a key to school improvement, especially by the principals, who talked mainly about principalship and the principal's role in building relationships, having an educational vision, setting a model, and recognising and encouraging attributes in others.

Most participants singled out the value of independent advice to boards on principal appointments, because they saw the principal as playing a key role. The workload of principals was seen as a barrier to school improvement, with principals in low decile, rural, and small schools perceived as facing stronger pressures. Two participants raised as a question whether it was desirable for schools to manage their own property, since property management is a lot of work, but there were different views on this.

There were three ways in which the roles of communities in relation to school improvement were depicted. One was as a "partnership" in respect to school planning and strategies. A second was as a source of tension, when relations between communities and the board or principal were not smooth. A third was in relation to the contribution that communities can make to education, if people are encouraged to be involved in meaningful ways.

Participants had different views on what three things would make the greatest difference in helping schools to improve. Principals focused on resourcing, staff development, and principal recruitment and training. National Ministry of Education and Treasury officials pinpointed understanding of the nature of school improvement, self-review and assessment, and building links with the community. Academics, teacher educators, and researchers emphasised professional development, access to funding related to identified areas where it is needed, and resources to enable enquiry. Regional Ministry of Education, Teacher Registration Board, and Te Puni Kōkiri representatives had views similar to the academics/researchers/teacher educators. Sector representatives and others tended to have views related to the needs of their constituencies.

Conclusion

In the overall conclusion, we point to the need for schools to create conditions to support reflective practice, and for a strong role to be played by government in offering the kinds of resources, support and professional development that enable schools to be effective learning organisations, continually improving.

2 OVERVIEW

In 1999, reflecting on a decade of school self-management in New Zealand, and reading the research on school effectiveness to provide a succinct guide for parents that would provide a deeper understanding than assumptions of quality linked to decile rating, Cathy Wylie, NZCER chief researcher, started to think about how schools became effective. She saw a gap between the emphases in the research literature describing school change in other countries, and our own experience. Common factors in studies of schools that made noticeable change were professional development focused on learning, regular time for school staff to reflect, analyse, plan, and review together, and access to external support for these activities. The assumptions underlying the implementation of school self-management in the 1990s treated schools as stand-alone units, without supplying infrastructure which could support them. Governance and management, and compliance with legislation, were given prominence. Our NZCER national surveys of primary schools showed that only 30 percent of primary teachers had any non-teaching time to work together in 1999, and that was less than the 35 percent who had this in 1989. Government support was increasing for some schools and clusters, but with time limits of just a few years, often within a contractual framework.

So how did New Zealand schools make substantial change? Why did schools feel the need to make change? Did they change simply in reaction to outside pressure, or as a result of their own values? Did change become an everyday practice, or need heroic effort? What kind of change is sustainable over time? How important are government provision and accountability frameworks?

The research reported here is the first phase in a study which we hope will help to provide some answers to those questions, and provide useful accounts for educators and policymakers of the different journeys that schools can take.

In this first phase, we describe the changes and processes of change that have occurred in ten urban primary schools over the last few years. These primary schools were recommended to us as schools which were doing good work, and which were on the move. One of the things we learnt was that few outsiders have shared knowledge of the work of schools in their area. Our original plan of identifying possible schools in two areas in New Zealand by collating the recommendations of local people from sector organisations and government agencies was not feasible.[1]

We also describe the views of school improvement held by experienced school sector personnel, including government officials, organisational representatives, academics and teacher educators who work with schools on their development. The work of these people is important for schools, since it provides a context that can support, constrain, or cut across the efforts of schools to improve their practice. Student learning lay at the heart of these views, with three different underlying approaches:

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[1] Before 1989, inspectors working with the school boards provided reliable and rich sources of information about schools in their area.

- the concept of school improvement as *school development,* generated by those in a school, in their own terms, to meet local needs, with an emphasis on processes and school culture;
- an emphasis on school improvement as *lifting school performance* where needed, and with government support, to meet national standards of performance in terms of legislation and goals related to raising student achievement and closing gaps, but seeing the role of school culture, values, and ownership of needs analysis and goals as fundamental to any change;
- an emphasis on school improvement as focusing on *meeting national or international academic standards,* within a competitive environment.

The first approach was shared by teacher educators, principals, academics, and researchers. Government officials tended to take the second approach. The third approach, which was least common, was taken by the New Zealand Business Roundtable, a sector representative, and a principal.

The first approach was closest to the actual experiences of the ten schools in this study, and reflects a policy environment where more infrastructure to support schools has become available since 1999, and the emphasis on raising performance has not been accompanied by prescriptive national tests or cut-off points.[2] All ten schools had a clear focus on raising student achievement, and most had assessment data showing improvements. Assessment data is discussed on pp. 22-25

This research was undertaken in 2001. In the second phase of the study, we hope to return to the ten primary schools in 2004, to see what further change has occurred, and whether the platforms for further development which we saw in 2001 did indeed foster ongoing positive change: sustainable school improvement.

School Improvement: Everyday Life, or Heroic Action?

Interest in understanding how schools become "effective" and ways to foster school improvement has grown greatly. NZCER has added another dozen books on the subject to its library in the last two years alone. Both of these concepts have a range of meanings. There is probably more understanding now that school effectiveness is not the clearly visible summit of a peak, to be reached through a defined route (improvement).

School improvement covers a spectrum. On the one hand, it can be seen as an ongoing process—perhaps better thought of as school development—in which one might see the same principles at work over a period of years, but taking different shape. On the other, it refers to more dramatic movement, turn-arounds from situations of crisis. Wherever schools are on this spectrum, they share the intention—more than a desire—to enrich student learning. For some, the enrichment can be thought of as vertical, manifest in higher levels of measurable achievement and activity. Others can afford to take a more horizontal approach, to extend the learning that lies within already high levels of measurable achievement.

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[2] This contrasts with the UK and the USA. A useful recent article summarising some of the key issues associated with this approach is Olson, L., "'Inadequate' yearly gains are predicted", *Education Week,* 3 April 2002, pp. 1, 24–26.

Recent work on value-added by schools, taking into account the existing performance levels of their intake, has shown that it is often quite hard to separate schools from one another in terms of student achievement, and therefore to have distinct groups of schools in terms of their effectiveness (e.g., Goldstein, Huiqui, Rath, and Hill, 2000; Rowe, 1999). New questions have been raised about whether schools are always effective for all their students, or for all subjects, with more *within* school variance showing than *between* school variance. A new generation of studies looking at school results over time also shows that an individual school's average performance is not consistent over time, making it harder to stratify schools according to their effectiveness—or, to continually meet set standards or goals related to student achievement (e.g., Gray, Goldstein, and Thomas, forthcoming; Kane and Staiger, 2001).

Indicators of Effectiveness

According to MacBeath (1999, p. 9) "the search for the effective school is like the hunt for the unicorn, a quest for a mythical entity". Typically, researchers have studied schools which have high proportions of students who score well on standardised tests, and have linked school performance with particular school characteristics, such as professional leadership, unity of purpose, order and high expectations for student learning (Bennett and Harris, 1999, p. 535).

The resulting sets of indicators of effectiveness would be difficult to disagree with: they are broad, and they fit with other research on learning. Sammons et al. (1995) reviewed more than 160 studies to create a list of 11 factors operating at the school level:

1. shared vision and goals;
2. a learning environment;
3. positive reinforcement;
4. concentration on teaching and learning;
5. monitoring of progress;
6. a learning organisation;
7. professional leadership;
8. home-school partnerships;
9. purposeful teaching;
10. high expectations;
11. pupil rights and responsibilities.

Yet these are abstract factors. It is one thing to read these, and another to work out what shape they might take within a particular school, and what priority to give one factor over another in terms of the order of action or allocation of financial and human resources.

Indicators of Improvement

One conceptualisation of effective schools, which provides coherence to such lists of factors or conditions as the one above, is of "rational, goal-oriented systems" with clear and agreed goals. Goals relate to student achievement, and are results-focused and measurable (Bennett and Harris, 1999, p. 535). The new schools' planning and reporting

framework, contained in the Education Standards Act 2001, explicitly emphasises such an approach as a way to improve schools (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 1). However, recent English research suggests that assumptions about the nature of strategic planning in school resource allocation may not be found in practice, especially in smaller schools (Levacic et al., 2000). Most of the officials we spoke with about school improvement also valued the use of achievement data to raise student performance as an essential aspect of school improvement.

The ten schools in this study do have a systemic approach to their work, and a clear focus on student learning. But not all their goals are measurable, and their views of student learning encompass more than achievement on tests. They take both a horizontal and a vertical view of student learning. They are perhaps less rational and goal-oriented in a narrow sense, and more attuned to the spirit of students, teachers, and parents and the community. They find ways to celebrate, affirm, and lift confidence.

The Creation of Self-Recognition and the Role of Positive Mirrors

Often the first priority in the processes of change was the creation of a community which could recognise itself positively. This was particularly important for schools where the impetus for change came from external attention and devaluation, such as a poor ERO review reported by local media, which led to substantial roll drops.

Changes in the quality of buildings and playgrounds take on important symbolic meaning: improvements here can provide positive mirrors which show the people who learn and teach in them that "we" matter, we have substance, and we can make a difference. There are other ways in which schools can build up new reflections in which to see themselves with more pride, more confidence. One school focused on developing sports teams (with uniforms). Others worked to get coverage of their celebrations and changes in local media, or, further along, entered national competitions for schools, or put themselves forward as lead or anchor schools for clusters.

Student behaviour, particularly in playgrounds, was another initial priority, particularly by schools coming out of crisis. There were quite different approaches to student behaviour in the ten schools, but each school had systems that emphasised student responsibility in relation to peers and school staff. Again, this is another way to provide a positive "we" experience.

Work with parents and the community also provides opportunities for positive mirrors, affirming the role of teachers, while extending the size of the "we". The schools in this study have found ways to involve parents more. Teachers are available to parents, visible to parents. They provide them with more information about student achievement, and enlist their interest and support to strengthen areas of weakness.

Shared occasions are made for celebration, or to unpack the mysteries of new curriculum and assessment. Ways are found for shy parents to contribute to the school, and gain confidence. Trustees saw themselves as part of the "we", providing ideas and resources, and representing the school positively: part of a shared endeavour.

In schools where change came with new principals brought in after crisis, some existing staff could not identify with the new "we", and left. The principal plays a key role in shifting schools and building platforms for change. It can take longer for a

teaching principal to work with staff to develop shared values and systems, and support to make those values live.

Strong Leadership

Leadership is not confined to principals. Most of the ten principals had an iron determination, as well as being good communicators, with a love of their school and its students, and sound educational knowledge. They were also inveterate learners, taking part in mentoring groups and professional associations, professional development, and study. They provided good models for their staff, and most encouraged others in their school to take on leadership roles.

Meaningful Effort

Creating and living an affirming culture is an important dimension to the ability of school staff to put in the effort required for change in schools. This effort appears to be sustainable in schools which have a culture of continual development: staff did not speak of any tensions between their dedication to their school and students, and finding time or room for their own families and interests. We did hear of such tensions in the other schools in our sample: schools which are "turning around", and schools which serve communities that experience considerable poverty and transience. Schools which have also positioned themselves at the cutting-edge of educational change, and attract substantial external attention, may also put heavy demands on staff.

The loads were not light, but they were not unevenly distributed. Staff were working in collaborative cultures, able to share experiences, both good and bad, and to provide each other with support. Talk in staffrooms at breaks was often used for this purpose, rather than to put the classroom behind them. Planning and evaluating became priorities for staff meetings.

There were also gains in student learning and behaviour to be witnessed and enjoyed. Some were substantial, some quickly observable; other gains were slight in overall terms, but mattered for individual students.

Real Stimulus

Another key ingredient in the effort which school staff make to improve student learning is their participation in stimulating professional development, which had a direct bearing on their teaching and support. All the schools put a premium on ongoing professional development, often with a whole-school or whole-area emphasis. They were selective in the Ministry of Education funded contracts they went for, and had learnt to limit what they took on. Quite a few of the principals and teachers felt that they also needed to set limits on the curriculum they covered: better to go fully and deeply, than broad and shallow. They used external advisors whose worth was proven. They put into practice what they learnt, and analysed its effect.

Changing beliefs and practices is hard, as Phillips, McNaughton, and MacDonald (2002, p. 99) point out, because existing classroom structures and practices have to be left intact while new ones are developed or old ones refocused. There may be competing beliefs that need to be judged. Practicalities of limited time and large class size can

impose constraints. Teachers need good reasons to change their practice. Changes in belief for teachers in the ten schools were associated with whole school professional development that engaged the teaching staff in developing a shared vision of what they wanted to achieve, and collaborative beliefs about expectations of "good" work in specific curriculum areas, and the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches and programmes. Teachers were keen to find out more about their students' learning, and how they could improve it, and were paying more attention to analysing individual pieces of work and contributions in class.

Finding One's Own Way

The ways in which the ten schools operated and worked were not formulaic. There were different approaches to curriculum learning areas, and different degrees of breadth and focus, with all putting singular energy into numeracy and literacy, while some schools offered a range of extension activities.

The schools that have a culture of continual development had a single-minded focus on student learning, through critique and development of classroom teaching. These schools displayed features that were congruent with the overseas research, and with the views of the experienced teacher-educators we interviewed, who emphasised that schools need to debate the curriculum within their own context and generate their own values—not as a static one-off discussion or formation for an accountability document, but through an evolving process. The schools were confident enough to draw their own curriculum priorities.

Schools that had to deal with turning around crises of poor image, low morale, and strained relationships were less able to apply this singular focus, more apt to also put effort into "marketing" their school and ensuring that they would gain favourable ERO reviews. They tended to make greater use of external support in aspects of school operation that were not directly related to classroom teaching.

Yet each of the schools had a sense of ownership about their values, and the goals and processes that came from those values. These values included high expectations for student learning, and a real belief that schools could make a difference for all children. Teachers in the low decile schools acknowledged the obstacles their students faced, but they were interested in making bridges for the students and their families which began with respect for their lives, and a sometimes tremendous sense of responsibility to provide opportunities for students to learn and experience success.

The teachers in low decile schools operated in conditions which could make the sustainability of change in these schools more precarious. Their curriculum resources were often meagre, and fund-raising was being carried out for basic curriculum activities, rather than extension. The additional demands on staff to build bridges with parents, especially if there was a range of ethnic groups, and highly mobile families, appeared to foster higher turnover. This has implications if key staff leave, and curriculum knowledge and community knowledge and contacts go with them.

Broader economic and social policies had a particular significance for low decile schools. Staff at two of the four low decile schools, although not asked explicitly, thought government education and housing policies since 1999 had brought a less competitive environment between schools, a less transient population since the introduction of

income-related rents, and more parents in paid employment. These changes impacted positively on student stability and well-being, and on the work of the schools.

The Role of External Support

None of the ten schools operated in isolation.

They benefited from open doors within education: to professional developers, advisors, networks of other principals and teachers, access to national organisations for staff and trustees, and the availability of useful curriculum and assessment resources. Getting a wider view, and using specific expertise where this was relevant to their goals, helped enhance the core work of teaching and learning. Shining examples came through of the value of Ministry of Education professional development contracts in helping schools clarify pedagogical goals and values, leading to change in classroom practice. Those schools that took part in the Literacy Enhancement Project found the workshops, the critical feedback, and the opportunities to observe other teachers and work together to develop literacy goals, and to assess and evaluate students' work, gave them an inspirational process that had an impact on teaching and learning. Teachers talked of how their participation had generated higher expectations for student learning, a sense of excitement about learning within the school, and a willingness to take risks by trying new things. They had also learnt to value working together to develop exemplars for student work, so that there were common standards operating through the school, and teachers could feel confident in their judgments. Again, such work also helps sustain a shared culture.

Assessment remains an area in which teachers particularly value external support and advice to develop or select appropriate assessment tools, decide what data to collect and analyse, and use the data to plan teaching programmes and improve teaching. Teachers also learn from communicating with teachers in other schools.

The schools' confidence with literacy and numeracy, and the priority they gave it, was not matched in other curriculum areas. Science operated on the margins, often under the leadership of newly trained teachers, or without any teacher taking responsibility to lead the area for the school. We suspect this is because there is no national focus on science and no professional development contracts offered to support it, even though good science curriculum resources are available. If curriculum areas are not integrated, the schools tend to cut the curriculum down.

They also opened their doors to government, community, and church agencies supporting vulnerable children or families, particularly in low decile schools. They sought out opportunities for sponsorship, support, and for their staff to work with others as educators and advisors. Building strong linkages was influential in supporting students, the staff, parents, and the school. These linkages tended to be long-term, and to develop over time.

Where meaningful connections were not built, as in ERO reviews that did not have relevance to the school's own goals, the interaction had no value in making a genuine contribution to school development. In these cases, compliance with outside requirements was achieved, but not much else. ERO reviews could precipitate a crisis which led to positive action, but the review itself was of use in only one school. The "naming and shaming" of one school that occurred after a bad ERO report was not constructive, and

heightened problems rather than helping the school. In most of the school accounts, ERO did not emerge as a key player in contributing to school development, but as something that had to be accepted.

All schools did not express the same needs for external support in all areas. One example is responsibility for school property. One principal whom we interviewed, from a large school of over 700 students, complained that the time and effort involved in making property decisions detracted from vital educational goals. Yet other principals and board members relished this work, in part because the school environment is an important way to affirm the community of the school, and the value of its members.

In the Future?

Six underlying principles are apparent from the picture of change in the ten schools in this study, within the recent policy environment:

- the creation of self-recognition and the role of positive mirrors;
- strong leadership;
- meaningful effort;
- real stimulus;
- finding one's own way;
- the role of external support.

What we are particularly interested in is whether these principles will be still apparent in three years' time, and whether we will see continued differences in patterns of change. For example, does a change of principal have a different impact in schools which have developed cultures of continual improvement from those which are recently turned around, or at the cutting edge? How do schools move into cultures of continual improvement? Does it matter if some schools have higher staff turnover, or remain reliant on recruitment of teachers without other responsibilities or commitments? Most of the whole school professional development was related to literacy and numeracy, particularly in low-decile schools. Will schools move on to tackle science, or other curriculum areas? Will they focus on curriculum integration? How much of their professional development opportunity and decision-making is related to government priorities? How will these schools use the new schools' planning and reporting framework?

3 THEMES AND ISSUES FROM THE TEN SCHOOLS

The full report provides case studies of each of the ten schools. In this section we draw out some common themes related to the process of change, and the conditions which supported them. Common elements in school development were:

- developing a school vision, culture, and focus;
- emphasis on student achievement, teaching, and learning;
- professional development and support for staff;
- working with parents and community;
- professional leadership, governance, and management.

The external environment, decile rating of the school, roll size, school funding and resourcing, and advisory/support services were influential in the stories of schools' development. These factors form a backdrop to the accounts.

The ten schools revealed different histories and different patterns of development. But we did find some patterns related to their starting points for change over the last three to five years. The three main "starting points" were:

- no clear starting point—cultures of steady development;
- rapid roll growth;
- crisis.

Three Development Paths

Cultures of Steady Development

Four schools could be described as being in a state of steady development. Two of these, Rico and Puriri, served low income communities (decile 2 and decile 1a); Pikitia was decile 3, and Freedom was decile 7. All schools had principals who had been in the school for a reasonable time (6, 13, 12, and 8 years respectively). In each of these schools, the most recent move was to raise teacher expectations of student achievement, and work to improve student achievement and behaviour. These schools placed a strong focus on classroom teaching and on teachers' commitment to developing their assessment, planning, and teaching practices to benefit students' learning. In all schools, school-wide professional development played a critical part, including critique and development of classroom teaching, and engagement of students within a learning community.

Two of the three lower decile schools had another strong platform in their concerted efforts to engage parents. They worked to develop greater coherence between school and home, or school and early childhood centre, through a range of measures.

All these "steady development" schools had developed links with community groups and local organisations, with the aim of strengthening resources for students and families.

Roll-growth Schools

Windsor School grew from 300 to 575 students from 1998 to 2001 to service a rapidly growing population in what had been a declining area. Tuna Nui School increased its roll by a third, from 193 to 255 students, in three years, because of changed community perceptions rather than demographic change.

The philosophies, climate, and programmes of each of the two "roll-growth" schools seemed to closely match the expectations and needs of the communities from which their students were drawn.

Windsor School (decile 6 overall) catered for many students in its primary campus from a decile 10 community. The principal reported high parental academic expectations, which the school tried to meet. Extension classes were provided for gifted students, and intermediate students had options to learn Japanese, French, architectural design, banking and shares, journalism, drama, book club, te reo Māori, and future problem solving. "State of the art" ICT amenities were provided; these, along with an attractive environment, were seen as necessary for the school to match high socio-economic status parental expectations. The school provided help for students with special learning needs, including those struggling with literacy and numeracy. It had a double satellite unit from a special school.

The roll growth in this school occurred because of demographic changes, as well as the school's ability to attract more students. The school proactively marketed itself to future parents, by visiting early childhood centres and welcoming visits from parents. Parents were involved in the school as volunteers, and teachers and the principal made themselves available to parents one night a week.

Tuna Nui was a decile 4 primary school that was also proactive in talking about the school to prospective parents, by holding information evenings in local early childhood centres and making school facilities available to these centres. The school had a reputation for inclusive education, for supporting cultural diversity, valuing Māori kaupapa and language, and for its extracurricular activities.

One of the challenges for both schools was adjusting to roll growth, including recruiting new teachers and coping with staff changes. Windsor School used structural means to preserve the "family" atmosphere of the school by organising the school as a campus with separate primary and intermediate schools, two deputy principals, and a school uniform for the intermediate. School-wide approaches to planning and assessment were instituted by new senior staff and offered consistency and support for teachers. Organisational structures in curriculum areas also brought teachers from across the school together with a shared purpose, and the strengths of each member of staff were used in professional development. These structures and practices enabled the school to cope with staff change, because all staff understood and could work with new staff members and support teaching and learning.

In Tuna Nui School, strong links with the community were assisted by the local knowledge of the principal and other staff members who had lived in the community for

many years. The fact that the principal was Māori helped her to gain the confidence of Māori parents. Her collaborative approach and shared leadership enabled common understandings and staff capacity to be built.

Crisis Turn-around Schools

The four schools that started from a point of crisis (Villa, Phoenix, Venture, and Totara) all had negative publicity at the crisis time that was causing parents to take their children away, and rolls to decline. In each of the schools, the previous principal had resigned or been counselled to leave, and there was a culture of low staff morale and division. The appointment and leadership of a new principal was the catalyst for positive change in these schools. In all four schools, the principal was committed to analysing and dealing with the problems, but they did this work in different ways.

One of the first tasks done by each principal was to clarify management and governance roles. Each developed a constructive relationship with the board chair, and training was provided to trustees. This relationship played an important role in providing backing for the principal, as well as an avenue for linking with parents, hearing their views, and involving them in school operation in a meaningful way. In the two low-income and culturally diverse schools, efforts were made to recruit parents from different ethnic groups to the board.

In one school where ERO had highlighted the need for policy development, the principal worked with the senior management team and the board chair to draft policies. In another school, the principal drafted these with the board chair, then took them out to the community and staff.

It seems symptomatic of schools in crisis that there is low morale and division amongst staff, and often between the school and community. The schools showed different ways of approaching these problems, but it was apparent that in order to move forward, a positive climate needed to be generated. This was done in two schools by making structural changes to organisation at syndicate or classroom teaching level, and so breaking down barriers. The accounts of Villa and Venture suggest that syndicates can operate in two different ways—as a source of collaboration and pedagogical support, or as a source of divisiveness.

Leadership Styles

Leadership styles and approaches to lifting staff morale and bringing staff into a coherent team varied, although this challenge faced three of the schools. The principal of Villa School was ruthless about "shifting poor performing staff" (in his view) and appointing staff who were sympathetic to his performance expectations. He saw himself as a "fix-it" man, who liked to sort out a problem and then move on. At the start of his leadership, most teachers were required to move from their classrooms to a different room. Only 3 of the 12 original teaching staff remained in the school three years after his appointment, although 2 were on short term contracts with other educational institutions. The others had been replaced by younger teachers. The co-operation of teaching staff seemed to have been gained by selecting staff to fit the principal's agenda, as well as involving and bringing along those staff who remained. While the principal said he encouraged staff and

students in the school to take on leadership roles, there was a common view that the changes to the school and the direction in which it was heading were largely attributable to the principal. In the other schools, the principal and staff credited the senior management team with playing a highly influential role in the change process.

A different approach was taken by the principal of Phoenix School, who recognised the need to "build strength from within", and worked with staff to build morale. She also recognised the importance of a strong management team, and worked closely and collaboratively with this team within the school. Staff members' work was acknowledged, and lines of communication were opened up. The ERO review had pinpointed inadequacies in curriculum coverage, and staff were supported through a range of opportunities for professional development in all curriculum areas. While there was some staff turnover because of redeployment, which resulted in staff changing classrooms, there was no requirement for staff to change, and no teacher was removed because of competency proceedings.

School Image

The four "crisis turn-around" schools all worked to change the physical and social environment of the school and to improve a poor public image. There were common approaches to this task: making the school grounds and buildings attractive and the environment welcoming, working to ensure high standards of student behaviour, and developing links with the community. Two schools were engaged in active marketing, through strategies aimed at attracting media coverage for positive achievements and events, and gaining awards for individual students. Phoenix School actively pursued relationships with local reporters and businesses, and promoted "good news stories" in the media. This school also entered students into national competitions, where some gained awards. Villa School entered itself into the Goodman Feilder Awards, and gained one of these.

Effective professional leadership, management, and governance at the crisis time is crucial. One school relied initially on the principal and board chair for direction and vision, but others had a participatory approach, using the skills and knowledge of the diversity of staff within the school to develop the direction. This makes it more likely that development is embedded into the life of the school, and can be sustained when a principal leaves.

All schools pursued their goals and direction with tenacity. Goals became more singularly focused on student learning, as immediate challenges of negative image, dysfunctional relationships, and other individual problems were addressed. These schools are now like the "steady state development" schools described below.

Vision, Culture, and Focus

All ten schools had clarity of purpose about school goals. These goals were shared and understood by all staff. In all schools, a core focus was on student learning and the right of every child to a sound education. Some schools described ways in which values about interactions with others were built up through discussion within the school community, and how these were modelled by adults in the school. Having a "shared vision" and

common philosophy seemed to encourage adults to be united in their approach, and consequently to have a stronger impact. The "vision" was not static. In the "crisis turn-around" schools, some pressing immediate goals lost their predominance after schools had successfully overcome problems of poor image and relationship difficulties. In these schools, the focus moved more intensively to student learning and behaviour once other issues had been addressed. Phoenix School, where the acting principal used the non-compliances in the ERO review as the basis for the management plan, generated and implemented its own goals after the school had addressed the non-compliances.

Teaching and Learning

High Expectations

A hallmark of the schools was the common belief that every child could learn and be successful. Teachers and principals held high expectations for student achievement. Statements reflecting these beliefs and expectations were particularly evident in the low decile schools, where social difficulties were not used as an excuse for low achievement. These schools actively resisted a "deficit" approach, recognising the skills and knowledge which each student brought to school. These schools believed they could make a difference, and one described itself as a "cycle breaker".

Pikitia School and Rico School provide examples of how teachers' perceptions of children's capabilities and expectations of children changed over time, through the school's involvement in Ministry of Education professional development contracts (respectively, the SEMO professional development initiative to strengthen literacy practices in the first year of schooling, and the Literacy Enhancement Project). These changes in belief were associated with changes in teaching practices. Students were "pushed" and extended. At Pikitia School, teachers modified their attitudes to learning approaches, shifting from a view that students needed time to settle in to school before formal teaching could begin to providing a mix of both developmental and formal teaching. Teachers were taking a more analytical approach to teaching and learning, and seeing that they could gain more understanding about individual students' learning needs from looking more closely at student work. David Stewart (2000, p. 149), writing about principals in a principals' mentoring group, noted the importance of such shifts in thinking: "It was an accepted maxim that 'you best change what teachers do by changing the way they think about what they do'."

Student Feedback

In most schools, student feedback was used to extend students, by offering them insight into the strengths and weaknesses of their own and others' work. This was associated with expectations that students would be responsible for taking a critical approach to their own learning. Rico School gave examples of how teachers were explicit with student groups about what was good work, and why, and how they identified with individual students the specific things they needed to work on, and why. At Totara School, classrooms were organised so that there was "space" for the provision of specific sustained feedback for every student at least once a week. As well, professional development highlighted ways

of recording feedback and sharing goals with students. Phoenix School used a system of student-led conferences to involve students in reporting and discussing their work with parents and teachers.

Curriculum Focus

All schools put major focus on literacy and numeracy, reflecting the national emphasis under the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) to give priority to student achievement in literacy and numeracy, the availability of Ministry of Education funded professional development contracts, and teachers' own views that these learning areas provide the foundation for other learning, and are key to participation in New Zealand society. Since science is not a current government focus, we purposely interviewed the science leader in each school, to see what emphasis it was given. Most schools either tried to integrate science, or gave it little emphasis and allowed it to slip back. Schools were generally unaware of new curriculum resources, possibly because this material was sent to schools without professional development. The view that the curriculum framework tried to cover too much came through in many comments about the unrealistic demands of the mandated curriculum.

The schools seemed able to be more creative under the revised NAGs to use achievement objectives selectively. The NAGs provide direction in six areas of school operation: curriculum requirements, documentation and self-review, employer responsibilities, financial and property management, health and safety, and administration and were revised (effective from July 2000) to provide, (amongst other things), some flexibility in monitoring, assessing, and reporting on student progress. The revision sought to link the monitoring of student progress and analysis and use of assessment data with strategic planning, self-review, and planning for staff professional development.

The greater flexibility allowed schools to actively construct their own goals, in response to analysis of the performance and needs of individual students and groups of students. This approach seemed to help engender a sense of responsibility to enhance student learning. In addition, schools seemed to be doing less, but in greater depth, either by cutting back or by integrating the curriculum, and taking approaches that suited their school community. Pikitia School connected learning experiences by addressing achievement objectives from several curriculum areas in a single unit of work, as well as integrating planning and assessment. Windsor School's approach was to pare back to basics in literacy and numeracy in Years 1–3, then offer a rich range of extension classes for gifted and talented students, and Australian Testing in English, Science, and Mathematics, for Years 4–8. Villa School gave priority to literacy in "the four Rs: wRiting, aRts, aRithmetic and Reading". It encouraged students to work on real-life problems in context, so that learning was meaningful, and to investigate and communicate in a variety of ways, including the use of ICT.

Only one school, Phoenix, described its efforts to cover all the essential learning areas. These efforts to attain full coverage of the curriculum were in response to a poor ERO review. However, once the school was back into the regular 3-yearly ERO cycle, it became focused on literacy and ICT.

Assessment and Achievement

Assessment

Schools took varying approaches to assessment. Some schools, which were part of the Ministry of Education Literacy Enhancement Programme, learned how to develop and moderate their own benchmarks through their work on this programme. Teachers thought that this had had the very positive result of providing consistent shared standards across the whole school, and clarity of expectation and common grounds from which teachers could analyse and discuss teaching and learning. The process of thinking about benchmarks and analysing students' learning against them encouraged schools to use assessment diagnostically, rather than simply see assessment mainly as producing material for compliance with external directives.

Totara, Rico, and Venture schools made marked shifts from summative to formative assessment. The accounts of these schools show that knowledge and thoughtful analysis is required to evaluate and assess learning, and to consider the next steps for individuals and groups of students. Villa School used assessment "parsimoniously", with teachers recording only what they considered they would use or need to use.

The case studies showed that becoming "assessment literate" could be a struggle. Schools needed help to develop or select appropriate assessment tools, interpret the data, and use the data to improve learning. In one school, narrow factual recall information which measured one aspect only of student performance was being used to support instructional decisions. Some teachers still tended to see assessment as something that was done *after* teaching.

Data analysed in terms of student groups highlighted some differences that required further analysis and action. Several schools found ethnic and gender differences in achievement. Totara and Puriri found that their transient students had lower scores than those whose entire school life had been spent in the one school.

Several schools used automated systems for collecting data. The Villa principal opposed automated systems, on the grounds that he thought they reduced teachers' decision-making to mechanics.

Villa was the only school where there was not a school-wide effort to have consistency of planning and assessment across classes (except for some assessment records to "smooth the transition" from one class to another). Others, like Windsor and Tuna Nui, argued that consistency ensures a coherent progression of learning for students, and useful support for teachers. Collaborative approaches enabled teachers to share work and skills, and to gain confidence.

All schools used assessment data in reporting to their Board of Trustees. In general, schools tried to make meaning out of the data, and to use it as a basis for comparison with previous years and for discussion of what the school was doing to improve achievement.

Evidence of Growth in Student Achievement Over Time

We asked the schools to provide us with information about student achievement levels over time. We did not ask them to cover all curriculum areas. Such information was easiest for the schools to provide where they had developed school-wide exemplars or

standards of expected achievement for different curriculum levels or units, or if they used standardised tests.

Some schools were changing the tests they used, which made it difficult to track change over time. Most of the schools provided analyses which gave more than average scores, enabling them to track the achievement of students at different levels, and identify students who needed additional attention. Some gave us information showing progress over the school year, evidence that they tracked student progress and identified areas of particular need (e.g., division in mathematics) at the start of the year, to help decide what to emphasise during their programme, and checked their teaching at the end of the year to see whether students had made sufficient progress to meet expectations.

The data schools gave us did indeed show that students benefited from their learning over the course of a school year. But this data could not show trends in student achievement levels over several years. It did provide snapshots of student achievement levels, and evidence of high achievement.

For example, in term 4 of 2001, at Pikitia school which is a decile 3 school, around 70 percent[3] of the Year 2 students were reading at or above the 6 year reading age, around 84 percent of the Year 3 students were reading at or above the 7 year reading age, around 72 percent of the Year 4 students were reading at or above the 8 year reading age, around 83 percent of the Year 5 students were reading at or above the Year 9 reading age, and around 82 percent of the Year 6 students were reading at or above the Year 10 reading age.

At Freedom, which is a decile 7 school, around 79 percent of Year 3 students were reading at or above the 7 years instructional reading level, around 96 percent of the Year 4 students were reading at or above the 8 years instructional reading level, 85 percent of the Year 5 students were reading at or above the 9 years instructional reading level, and 94 percent of the Year 6 students were reading at or above the 10 years instructional reading level.

Early Comparisons

Few of the schools provided data that went back beyond 2001. Trends in raising student achievement levels schoolwide can take some years to establish, with concerted effort. The initial comparisons which schools could make showed some encouraging trends.

The early results for the two schools which had an external advisor working on writing were encouraging. At Rico school, which had a strong professional development focus on writing, early 2002 writing scores on a common task were higher for Years 4–6 than the same task undertaken in early 2001, with the shift in scores most evident for Years 5 (12 percent meeting or exceeding expected levels of achievement in 2001, compared with 58 percent in 2002), and Years 6 (8 percent meeting or exceeding expected levels of achievement in 2001, compared with 72 percent in 2002).

[3] These percentages are approximate because they were taken from graphs.

At Puriri school, 2001 writing scores were markedly higher for Year 2 students (83 percent meeting expectations compared with 47 percent in 2000), Year 3 students (58 percent in 2001 compared with 44 percent in 2000), Year 4 students (37 percent in 2001 compared with 26 percent in 2000), Year 5 (21 percent compared with 3 percent in 2001), and Year 6 (56 percent in 2001 compared with 5 percent in 2000). Fifty-nine percent of students in 2001 were meeting their expected writing achievement, compared with 24 percent in 2000. The proportion of students under-achieving expected levels of achievement remained, however, at around a quarter for each year.

The assessment data supplied by Venture Intermediate showed improvement in student achievement between 2001 and 2002 for PAT reading comprehension and mathematics, and writing standards based on curriculum levels (each level was divided into two), particularly at the lower end.

Trends Over Time

Several schools were able to provide clear evidence of rises in student achievement levels over three or more years. It was not always constantly upwards, reflecting the natural variability of students, teacher expertise, and to some degree the priority given to a given curriculum area in a given year, including professional development. Sometimes scores would leap noticeably from one year to the next, and then remain much the same over the next two to three years. This is consistent with a U.S. study showing that student scores do vary over time, even in high performing schools. (Linn and Haug, 2002)

In Freedom school, the proportion of students scoring in the bottom quartile for PAT maths at Year 4 was 36 percent in 1998, falling to 15 percent in 2002, while the proportion of students scoring in the top quartile rose from 11 percent to 48 percent. Where 35 percent were scoring in the lower quartile for PAT maths at Year 5 in 1999, 27 percent of the Year 5 students did so in 2002, and the proportion in the upper quartile went from 10 percent to 26 percent over these four years. Thirty percent of the 1998 cohort were in the bottom quartile at Year 6 (and 16 percent in the top quartile); the 2002 Year 6 students had only 15 percent of students in the bottom quartile at Year 6, and 43 percent in the top quartile—both proportions which were better than the performance of this particular cohort in Years 4 and 5.

At Villa school, the average instructional reading book level jumped from 6 in 1999 to 11 in 2000, and remained much at that level for 2001 and 2002. There was a similar trend for 6 year net results.

At Tuna Nui school, results from 1999–2001 using Wellsford maths tests for addition and subtraction show consistently high proportions of students—around 90 percent—achieving a mark of more than 50 percent. Year 5, 6, and 7 student scores on the maths tests for multiplication and addition increased on the whole between 2000 and 2001. Six year net scores for vocabulary median scores were 2 in 1997, and rose to 3.5 in 1998 and 1999; and letter identification scores rose from a median of 6 in 1997 to 6.5 in 1998 and 1999.

- At Totara school, (decile 1) reading book levels for Year 1 students in 2000 were one to two levels above the levels in 1998; most students were reading at 5.3 or higher by the end of their first year. Year 2 reading levels rose markedly between 1998 and 2000—from an average of 5.3 to a 6–8 range. There were also some increases in Years 3 and 4. In

Years 5–8, around two-thirds of the students read at or above their chronological age over the three year period, and around a quarter read at a level 1–18 months below their chronological age. The proportion of those reading two years or more below their chronological age was reduced from 15 percent in 1998, to 8 percent in 1999 and 10 percent in 2000.

Professional Development and Support for Staff

All the schools placed a high emphasis on professional development for teachers. Some stated that professional development for support staff was important too.

Individual or School-Wide Approaches to Professional Development

Most schools supported both individual and whole school approaches to professional development, but described different benefits from these. Participating in conferences, study, and courses as individuals had benefits in enabling staff to address their own individual learning needs. Contact with teachers, researchers, academics, and teacher educators outside the school could bring new ideas and perspectives, and encourage teachers to question their teaching practices, think about ideas and approaches, and articulate what they do and why. Pikitia School showed how working in USA schools on a demonstration programme of literacy effectiveness helped an individual teacher to understand her own practice better. The experience also had the effect of boosting confidence and offering a refresher to an experienced teacher. The Venture Intermediate principal believed that the teachers' and support staff members' passions, as well as school priorities, should be catered for. These views highlight the importance of each individual staff member taking responsibility for their own development of expertise and understanding, as well as being part of school-wide professional development.

However, a common view was that individualised opportunities for professional development did not bring benefits to other staff. The professional development that schools found most useful for enhancing school-wide teaching and learning involved teachers working together in a whole school approach. The Villa principal went so far as to state that in most cases, only professional development that involves the entire staff has the power to impact on classroom practice.

Whole School Professional Development

There were common themes threaded through the descriptions of whole school professional development. These themes related to:

- identification of professional development needs;
- professional development processes;
- conditions under which professional development was held.

Identification of Professional Development Needs

Each of the schools showed that analysis of data on student learning was a useful basis for identifying learning needs within the school, and pinpointing areas where a concentrated

collective effort could lift achievement for all students, both as groups and as individuals. The most common examples of school-wide professional development were related to improving achievement in curriculum areas. In all schools, aspects of literacy and/or numeracy were reported to be a key focus. Three schools focused on ICT. Only one school had undertaken professional development in all seven essential learning areas.

There seem to be two main reasons why literacy and numeracy were singled out for professional development at this time. One is to do with the central role played by primary schools in teaching numeracy and literacy, and the common view that skills in these areas are necessary for successful participation in society. A second is to do with the government's objectives to improve literacy and numeracy, and the availability of Ministry of Education contracts in these areas. All nine primary schools had taken part in the first part of the Ministry of Education's Literacy Leadership Project for primary school principals, on developing a strategic framework and literacy vision for the school. Seven schools had participated in the third part, on using literacy materials. Four schools had undertaken or were undertaking the Literacy Enhancement Programme, involving a whole school approach over three terms to enhance literacy achievement. The focus of this work was on classroom practice.

Venture Intermediate, which was not eligible for this project, was taking part in work with an external consultant on developing benchmarks for achievement for written language. One school (Tuna Nui) was participating in Project Abel,[4] with an emphasis on assessment of the number strand in Mathematics. Another indicated that it would apply to be part of this project in 2002. One school had been part of SEMO's[5] Early Childhood Primary Link project.

Three schools (Freedom, Villa, Pikitia) were engaged in whole school professional development on aspects of ICT to support learning. These schools were particularly interested in using ICT as part of classroom programmes for teaching and learning. Villa was a lead ICT school for the area.

Features of Professional Development

There were common features to professional development processes that schools identified as being valuable.

- There were high expectations about student achievement.
- Goals and benchmarks were developed across the whole school based on information about student achievement.
- Professional development was related to identified needs of students and teaching skills and knowledge.
- Professional development was offered for teachers as a staff group and as individuals. This took a variety of forms, including whole school workshops, teachers observing others teach, teachers working in pairs, and teachers being observed and receiving feedback on their own teaching.

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[4] Project Abel (Assessment for Better Learning) is a Ministry of Education professional development contract for teachers.

[5] SEMO (Strengthening Education in Otara and Mangere) is a Ministry of Education schooling improvement initiative.

- Staff members who were skilled in the area of focus led professional development, as did external facilitators.
- There was a belief that all teachers contributed to student achievement and all could develop professionally.

Conditions to Support Professional Development

Conditions within schools supported professional development. Time was made available to talk about teaching and learning at staff and syndicate meetings, and one school used a "buddy" system to bring new teachers on board. Outside facilitators were involved. Some principals said that they chose only those outside facilitators whom they knew were very good. Staff involvement from the beginning meant that all staff understood and "owned" the goals. Some schools developed their own benchmarks, as well as using national benchmarks. This process seemed to generate a sense of unity, as well as excitement at creating tools appropriate for local conditions. Student achievement was seen as the responsibility of all staff.

Parents and Community

Schools worked with parents in different ways:

- reporting to parents about their child;
- offering advice and encouragement for parents to reinforce learning at home;
- supporting parents through establishment of parent support groups (these were most common for parents of ethnic groups other than Pākehā);
- involving parents in decision-making by canvassing their views;
- involving parents in projects to support the school, such as fund-raising and resource development;
- involving parents through work with students, e.g., on school trips and in homework centres.

Staff in all schools thought that parents wanted to know where their child stood in relation to other students, in terms of broad levels. Parents indicated that they wanted comparative information, and to know what they could do to help their own child. Teachers in most of the schools were trying to report to parents with assessment information that could be understood and useful. All schools used a variety of methods of reporting: parent teacher evenings, formal written reports (e.g., with assessments and comment, portfolios of work), having an "open door" policy. Some schools were sending home annotated examples of students' work, explaining what was good and what needed to improve, and indicating the kind of help that could enhance learning.

There were different approaches to parent involvement in learning and participation in the school. These were associated with decile rating and ethnic diversity. Three lower decile and ethnically diverse schools had made special efforts to attract parents from representative ethnic groups to participate in the school. Pikitia invited parents to library sessions and coffee and information mornings. Totara held a voluntary homework club, organised in response to requests from Sri Lankan parents and a Māori support group.

Puriri had a Pasifika parent support group and was part of the Home School Initiative Programme, was supporting the building of a Samoan A'oga Amata in its grounds, and involved Māori parents in weaving tukutuku panels.

These schools worked from the basis that parents have substantive knowledge and skills to enhance their own child's learning, and encouraged parents to use their skills and knowledge. Both Puriri and Totara encouraged parents to talk and read to their children in their own languages. Both had language books to lend. Pikitia created coherence in children's lives by drawing on its work in SEMO's Early Childhood Primary Link project to share expectations and information between parents, early childhood teachers, and primary teachers. It was proactive in identifying likely enrolments to the school, and inviting these families to pre-entry activities and events, where there was an emphasis on school practices and how parents could support student learning at home. Work with parents to build understanding for teachers, students, and parents may help achieve greater coherence in children's lives, and avoid mismatches between school and home. Work with parents provided satisfaction for teachers in these low decile schools, as well as challenges.

Professional Leadership, Governance, and Management

Styles of professional leadership varied in the ten schools, although many participants remarked that effective leadership was necessary for school improvement. Most regarded "leadership" as wider than principalship. Different styles of leadership were apparent in the ways in which staff were appointed and supported. There were two main approaches:

- Schools in which the principal saw his/her role as pivotal to school development and largely followed his/her goals and vision, especially in the early days after appointment. Within this approach, teachers who fitted the principal's vision for the school were appointed. At Venture Intermediate, there was an emphasis on appointing people who were "reflective by nature". In Villa School, the principal described new staff as young and enthusiastic, and willing to commit to high performance expectations.
- Schools in which the principal worked collaboratively with all staff to build goals. In these schools there was a strong theme that all staff had significant areas of expertise; efforts were made to foster these, and to provide opportunities for staff to share them.

A feature of all the schools was the "iron will" of the principal to build an effective school.

External Factors Related to Resourcing

Decile Rating

Some differences in school focus and operation were associated with decile rating. The four lower decile primary schools (deciles 1, 2, and 3) all made special efforts to build links with outside health and welfare agencies, and form productive relationships to benefit students, e.g., by arranging for health checks and discounted services. There was

an emphasis in these schools on involving a culturally diverse community in the school, on working to strengthen the operation of the Board of Trustees, and on developing ways to involve parents in their children's learning. The lower decile primary schools had a strong focus on literacy and numeracy, and were less likely to offer enrichment programmes or a wide range of extra curricular activities.

Resources and Funding

All schools were active in seeking additional sources of funding, and none believed their funding was adequate. Table 2 sets out details of each school's decile rating, roll size, amount charged in fees and donations, and amount made in local fund-raising in 2000. The amounts raised by the schools themselves varied from $2,649 in a decile 1b school to $31,674 in a decile 9 school. Both these schools had similar numbers of students.

Table 2
School Fund-raising

School	Roll size	Decile rating	Amount raised in fund-raising 2000 (after expenditure on fund-raising)	Activity fee	Donation
Puriri	186	1a	$3,681	$40 one child $50 two children $60 three or more	Nil
Totara	233	1b	$2,649	$60 one child $100 two or more children $45 resource fee	Nil
Rico	304	2	$4,656	$40	$40
Venture Intermediate	585	2	$30,726	$30 one child $60 family $48 per year technicraft	Nil
Pikitia	464	3	$20,000		$30 one child $35 family
Tuna Nui	255	4	$33,815		Nil
Windsor	575	6	$24,176	$100 for IT, technology materials and internet use 1 Year 7–8	$95 (Yrs 1–6) $45 (Yrs 7–8)
Phoenix	304	5	$17,373	$3–$7 per activity about twice a term	$50 child $80 family
Freedom	395	7	$11,633	$80 per child $65 each if two or more children	Nil
Villa	230	9	$31,674	$32	$60 child $120 family

Middle and higher decile schools had greater capacity to fund-raise, and could ask for higher voluntary fees. Targeted funding enabled decile 1–3 schools to cover some costs that individual parents met over and above school fees and fund-raising in other schools, including school trips and lunches (for some students), and to contribute to literacy resources for home use, e.g., Duffy Books in Homes, a library of Pasifika language books.

Extracurricular activities and extension classes were a feature in higher decile and larger schools. These schools bought additional resources, especially in ICT.

The ways in which schools prioritised their spending indicated a commitment to professional development and support for student learning. Schools that had been bulk-funded[6] generally used the extra funding it provided to employ more staff. Schools which had not taken up bulk funding used their share of the funding redistributed when bulk funding ended to employ teachers or teacher aides to work with students, or to provide release time for senior staff to offer professional support for teachers.

The common use of operational funding to employ more staff to improve learning opportunities and professional capability raises an interesting question about the balance between operational funding and staffing in government support of schools.

Government Education and Housing Policies

Principals, some parents, and teachers in two of the lowest decile schools (Rico and Puriri) thought that recent government policy changes had brought positive change that was benefiting students, parents, and the school. They mentioned the following changes and their impacts:

- more money in the school system, following the abolition of bulk funding;
- a less competitive environment;
- a more positive public view of teachers;
- a more constructive role being played by ERO;
- educational decisions being made for the right reasons in consultation with communities;
- a greater sense of shared responsibility for education (not just the school's fault if the school did not "shape up");
- a less transient population, after the introduction of income-related rents enabled some families to remain in state houses;
- more parents in paid employment.

In one of these schools, it was noted that free or low-cost health care for children aged 0–6 had a noticeable impact on students' health, and needed to be extended to primary-aged students. One teacher thought itinerant vision and hearing testers would be a useful service, since some parents did not take their children to referred specialists because of cost. In the other school, teachers had made their own links with local specialists and doctors to develop a low-cost referral system for hearing and sight problems.

[6] Originally known as bulk funded schools, then directly resourced schools, then fully funded schools.

Roll Size

Larger schools seemed to be less reliant on changes of individual staff, since there was a greater pool of staff to call on. The principal of the smallest school in the study (Puriri) expressed concerns that the school was about to lose three of its experienced staff members, through leave and career moves. He predicted that it would be hard to fill these positions and the expertise of the school would need to be rebuilt.

The progress of another of the smaller schools seemed dependent on key personnel, making its success also somewhat fragile. There was a large work burden on a few individuals.

Ministry of Education Professional Development Contracts

All the schools made good use of Ministry of Education professional development contracts. They were discerning about the programmes that they used, choosing professional development facilitators who were known to be highly effective. Participation in these programmes, and use of resources and funding from their involvement, helped teachers to better assess students, focus on needs, and lift achievement.

4 CONCLUSION

This summary of the full report has described case studies of ten schools selected as improving schools and views about school improvement. The study shows school improvement in reality, not as a neat formula that any school can pick up or adapt, but as experienced and situated within local and national contexts. The case study schools are good lively schools, but inevitably none were perfect. The analysis of practices and processes taking place within the schools, and the perspectives of the 32 key school sector personnel raise issues about the purpose and nature of schools, teaching and learning, and the role of government in respect to schools. Exploration of these issues contributes to thinking about how to shape the future of schools, and raises questions for policy and practice.

We found almost universal agreement that improving the learning and achievement of individuals and groups of students is the basis of school improvement. Learning is defined broadly as skills, attitudes and knowledge. Literacy and numeracy are important objectives, but most participants believe, like Durie (2001, p.4), that schools have responsibilities to contribute to wider goals, so that students are able to "actively participate as 'citizens of the world'" from a strong base of self-identity and knowledge of their world.

A central message is that schools need to build goals for themselves in relation to their own individual students and communities. In schools that were steadily developing, teachers knew their students well, held strong beliefs that all students could learn and be successful, and had high expectations for every student. Social difficulties were not used as an excuse for low achievement. The schools believed they could make a difference.

Schools that were steadily developing had an analytic and openly thoughtful culture with students' interests at the heart. They applied rigorous efforts across the whole school to develop common benchmarks, analyse student learning and evaluate teaching in order to improve student learning. Analysis was a feature of many aspects of school operation, applied to teaching and learning, behavioural standards, school environment, and school policy: it was not done only at formal review times, or within a senior management team. There was an emphasis on processes to generate school development and school culture.

Therefore what works in schools and classrooms is not able to be prescribed. The schools that were making teaching and learning the core focus of their work were creating their own goals, pedagogical practices and assessment processes from analysis of strengths and weaknesses and the achievements of their students. This creation and re-creation was not an ineffective duplication of work, since in this way all staff gained common and deeper understanding and beliefs that could be harnessed to their own work. They learned from each other, making use of expertise and developing skills through a variety of ways – observation, mentoring, feedback, and professional development. There was not a single "right way".

Other features of schools that were steadily developing were:

- the generation of a "learning community" where everyone was encouraged to see themselves as learners and take a critical approach to their own learning;

- effective leadership, with a key role being played by the principal and senior management staff.

Conditions and systems to support schools can be provided within schools themselves and by external organisations and government agencies. Conditions are strengthened when there is consistency and connection between the internal and external systems and support.

Teachers' creation of goals, pedagogical practices and assessment processes were supported by:

- regular opportunities during school weeks for teachers to talk with other teachers about teaching and learning;
- teachers keeping up to date with and discussing research and educational ideas;
- professional development, including school-wide professional development, as a core condition of work for all school staff;
- schools having contact with "outsiders" who had expertise and knowledge, and who brought new ideas and perspectives;
- teachers working with other teachers to observe, analyse and discuss their teaching practice.

Schools can place priority on reflective discussion through a range of ways, e.g.:

- re-organising the agenda of staff meetings so that more time can be spent in professional discussion, with some other matters being handled in other forums or by other means;
- making planning and expenditure on professional development an ongoing priority for the school;
- using the skills of each teacher within the programme of professional development and analysis of practice

But schools cannot create conditions to support reflective practice on their own. Teachers would benefit by having the kinds of conditions available in collective agreements to support reflective practice, such as opportunity for paid release time to enable them to work with others, access to sabbatical and study leave. Schools need access to outsiders – curriculum advisors, resource teachers, academics, teacher educators, mentors to provide professional support as well as others for specific needs. "The deeper problems of schooling have to do with teacher isolation and the fact that teachers don't often have access to other people who know what they're doing when they teach and who can help them do it better" (Eisner, 2001, p. 369).

Relevant professional development needs to be available to all schools. Access to professional development occurring over a period of one or two years was a feature of the schools that showed steady development. The schools demonstrated that professional development based on identification of school needs, involving the whole school, and addressing teachers' content knowledge as well as pedagogical practice, was particularly

beneficial in contributing to changed teaching and learning. Some Ministry of Education contracts, e.g., professional development associated with SEMO, and Literacy and Numeracy Enhancement Projects were highlighted as being very valuable. However, the current system of professional development contracts set in areas of government priority will not cater for all needs or enable all schools to have access. The study found a low priority given to some curriculum areas, e.g., science where there was no uptake of professional development by most schools.

Hawk, Hill and Taylor (2001) believe that schools must find ways to make sure that teachers gain more than professional knowledge, that professional development needs to change practice and be linked to outcomes for students. Some professional development projects in New Zealand have been the subject of research evaluations, but the research component needs to be built into all professional development contracts. Teachers also need access to useful and clearly communicated New Zealand based research.

The study showed a struggle for some schools to select and use assessment tools appropriately, and interpret and use data for student learning. Some schools needed a greater understanding of assessment, access to a range of assessment tools and knowledge of how to use and communicate about these. The Education Standards Act 2001 requires school charters to have a new section from 2003 setting out goals for student achievement for the next 3–5 years, improvement targets for the current year, and the activities the school plans to reach its strategic goals (Ministry of Education, 2001). In primary schools, the task of measuring change in student achievement given small numbers of students at each age level, natural variation occurring with each year's intake, and aspects of curriculum which do not lend themselves to easy measures is complex. How schools cope with the new planning and reporting framework, and whether they get the help they need will be examined when we return to the schools in 2004.

Government intervention can offer schools a platform from which to build, or a prescription to which they have to adhere. Ministry of Education officials were struggling with ways to "get the partnership right" between themselves, ERO, and schools, and had moved away from the pure self-management philosophy that was evident in the early to mid 1990s. They were keen to support beneficial linkages among schools, and between schools, government agencies and ministries. However, there was a predominant focus on the "safety net" aspect of their work, on assisting schools to self-review and on encouraging communities and boards to adopt responsibilities that had been prescribed for them.

Those involved in the work of schools on a regular basis identified ways in which schools could be strongly supported. These included sufficient resourcing and funding, reducing workload, removing irrelevant paper work, and improving communication and consultation. Staff in some schools had extra heavy workloads:

- schools at the cutting edge of educational change, where teachers needed to keep abreast of new learning and showcase this for other schools;
- schools which are turning around, and are working to cope with a myriad of issues. These could range from low morale, a poor public image, student behaviour, unattractive school environment, poor systems and policies, as well as improving student achievement. Often, in the first instance the workload fell especially on the principal and senior management;

- schools with small rolls, where there was a smaller pool of staff to call on, and progress seemed dependent on key personnel. Where staff left, expertise needed to be rebuilt;
- schools which had considerable poverty and transience. In these schools, extra efforts were needed to fund-raise for basic curriculum activities, and transient students were achieving less well than other students.

Wylie (1998) suggested that for positive change to occur in schools, educational principles should underpin educational systems and policy. She said that to "move to a system where learning and capacity building is at the centre, we need to increase the linkages between schools and government departments, to have real dialogue" (p.89). This study reinforced this view. One implication is the importance of policy makers consulting with practitioners about their experiences and needs. The themes coming through this study point to the need for a strong role to be played by government in offering the kinds of resources and guidance that enable all schools to be effective learning organisations, continually improving.

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